

Thomas Robinson House  
64 Washington Street  
Newport  
Newport County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-280

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
31-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## THOMAS ROBINSON HOUSE

HABS  
RI,  
3-NEWP,  
31-

Location: 64 Washington Street, Newport, Newport County,  
Rhode Island

Present Owner: Mr. Henry Austin Wood, Jr.

Present Occupants: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Austin Wood, Jr.

Present Use: Summer residence

Statement of  
Significance: This broad, gambrel-roofed house is one of the best  
examples of Newport's merchant residences of the  
18th century. Due to continuous family ownership  
since 1761, the interior and exterior retain their  
authentic character. An alteration by Charles F.  
McKim in 1874-1875, converted the large kitchen  
into a sitting room, a complete expression of the  
American Free Classic style.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Begun before 1736.
2. Architect and builder: Architect unknown; builder, unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: This building is located  
in Plat 12, Lot 121. The following is an incomplete chain  
of title from Newport City Clerk's Records for the city of  
Newport. Reference is to volume and page of the Land  
Evidence Books, (LEB.--, p.--).

1756 Deed of June 1, 1756, recorded in LEB. 13, p. 413.

From: William Corey and Mary, his wife, by Indenture  
To: Henry Knowles and Sarah, his wife

"... Lots numbered 61 and 62 on Easton's Point..."

1759 Deed of August 3, 1759, recorded in LEB. 14, p. 274.

From: Henry Knowles et ux  
To: Edward Wanton and Sarah, his wife

1760 Deed of February 27, 1760, recorded in LEB. 14, p. 372.

From: Edward Wanton et ux  
To: Thomas Robinson

"At that time, the old house...was known as 'the old tavern.' The purchaser added two north rooms, with bedrooms above them." See Henry Wood Papers, in the collection of Henry A. Wood, Jr.

1761 Deed of October 26, 1761, recorded in LEB. 15, p. 78.

From: Thomas Cranston and Mary, his wife  
To: Thomas Robinson

"... Lots numbered 63 and 64 on Easton's Point..."

1817 Probate of December 1, 1817, recorded in the Probate Record Book 5, p. 405.

From: Thomas Robinson  
To: Sarah, his wife, and his children, Abigail Robinson and Joseph Jacob Robinson  
By: Will dated May 21, 1810

1835 Probate of April 6, 1835, recorded in the Probate Record Book 10, p. 173.

From: Abigail Robinson  
To: Esther Minturn, niece, 1/8 interest  
Esther M. Smith, niece, 1/4 interest  
Robert Morton, nephew, 1/8 interest  
By: Will dated May 1, 1834

1835 Deed of June 29, 1835, recorded in LEB. 20, p. 408.

From: Joseph Jacob Robinson  
To: Esther M. Smith, 1/2 interest

1835 Deed of August 5, 1835, recorded in LEB. 20, p. 434.

From: Esther Minturn  
To: Esther M. Smith, 1/8 interest

1835 Deed of October 5, 1835, recorded in LEB. 20, p. 474.

From: Daniel B. Smith and Esther M. Smith, his wife  
To: Mary Williams, for Life Lease

1836 Deed of September 19, 1836, recorded in LEB. 38, pp. 455-458.

From: Robert Morton  
To: Daniel B. Smith and Esther M. Smith, 1/8 interest

- 1853 Quit Claim by Deed of May 26, 1853, recorded in  
LEB. 31, p. 232.

From: Proprietors of Easton's Point of the Society  
of Friends  
To: Mary Williams

- 1864 Quit Claim by Deed of November 5, 1864, recorded  
in LEB. 38, pp. 462-465.

From: Mary Williams  
To: Esther Morton Smith

- 1865 Probate of May 17, 1865, recorded in the Probate  
Record Book 46, p. 371.

From: Esther Morton Smith  
To: Benjamin R. Smith, her son, for life, then to  
his children  
By: Will dated March 16, 1855

- 1904 Probate of April 13, 1904, recorded in the Probate  
Record Book 60, p. 46.

From: Benjamin R. Smith  
To: Esther F. W. Smith, his wife, and his children,  
Anna Wharton Wood, Esther Morton Smith, and  
Edward Wanton Smith  
By: Will dated May 17, 1899

- 1904 Deed of October 5, 1904, recorded in LEB. 113,  
pp. 396-398.

From: Henry Austin Wood and Anna Wharton Wood, his  
wife, Esther Morton Smith, and Edward Wanton  
Smith  
To: Esther F. W. Smith, widow of Benjamin R. Smith

"... All that certain House and Lot Situate on  
Washington Street, Beginning at the corner of said  
street and a street or passage running to the water  
as a continuation of Poplar Street thence in a  
Northerly direction along Washington Street to a  
street or passage running to the water as a continuation  
of Willow Street thence Westward by said street to  
low water mark, thence in a Southerly direction along  
the line of low water mark, to the first mentioned  
street or passage and Eastwardly along the same to  
Washington Street... # 64 Washington Street..."

- 1915 Esther F. W. Smith died March 4, 1915.

From: Esther F. W. Smith  
To: Edward Wanton Smith and Francis R. Taylor in  
trust for her children, Anna, Esther, and  
Edward  
By: Will dated May 19, 1905, recorded in Philadelphia,  
Register of Wills, Book 364, p. 552.

1940 Probate of October 1, 1940, recorded in the Probate  
Record Book 114, p. 130.

From: Edward Wanton Smith  
To: William Wharton Smith and Francis Taylor in  
trust and to Henry Austin Wood, Jr., nephew,  
who shall become sole owner of the Robinson  
House

1942 Probate of March 25, 1942, recorded in the Probate  
Record Book, 114, p. 139.

From: Esther Morton Smith  
To: Henry Austin Wood, Jr. 1/3 interest  
By: Will dated April 30, 1941

1944 Deed of April 20, 1944, recorded in LEB. 155, p. 130.

From: William Wharton Smith and Francis R. Taylor,  
Executors and Trustees under will of Edward  
Wanton Smith, deceased, Sarah A. G. Smith,  
William Wharton Smith and Dorothy Waring Smith,  
Edward Wanton Smith, Jr., Esther Fisher Benson  
and John Howard Benson, Deborah Wharton Lutman  
and Frank C. Lutman, M.D., and Francis R.  
Taylor, Trustee under will of Esther F. W.  
Smith  
To: Henry Austin Wood, Jr.

4. Original plans: None known.

5. Alterations and additions: The original three-bay, three-room-plan house could have been built as early as 1725. Soon after the purchase of the land and house in 1760, Thomas Robinson enlarged the house to the north, adding a sitting or living room to the east and a kitchen to the west. The small entrance was enlarged to accommodate the symmetrical arrangement of windows and entrance on the street or east facade. This addition was deeper than the original house. Therefore there is an eight-foot projection on the west facade. The second and third floors have this same room arrangement--one room in the northwest corner and one in the northeast corner. In 1874-1875, Charles F. McKim converted the 1760 kitchen into a sitting room,

adding a five-sided bay to the north. He placed a single-story porch on the west facade, extending from the center hall axis to the old kitchen door on the north wall. A single-story kitchen ell with a decorative, shingled gable at the chimney was added to the south at this time. A roof-top gallery with squared and turned balusters and flame corner finials appears in photographs of the house taken after the addition of the kitchen. This was later removed. A gallery which was in the basement of the Robinson House was placed on the Nichols-Wanton-Hunter house (RI-7) in the 1950's. Between 1835 and 1874, exterior louvered shutters were placed on the first-floor windows. By 1919, all windows had louvered shutters. These have since been removed. The decorative gable on the kitchen ell has been removed.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

During the French occupation of the city of Newport in the Revolutionary War, July, 1780, to June, 1781, the Vicomte de Noailles, a lieutenant-colonel of the Soissonais Regiment, was quartered in the house. In the summer of 1780, Madame de Noailles sent Mrs. Robinson a Sèvres tea set in appreciation for the kindness extended to the Vicomte during his stay. The tea set is on display in the dining room corner cabinet. Thomas Robinson was a Commission Merchant and importer of British goods. He also had a part interest in a distillery, c. 1753. In 1761, Robinson was a member of the United Company of Spermaceti Chandlers.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The Newport Historical Society and the Wood family have a series of interior and exterior photographs dating from c. 1864. A photograph of the McKim room was published in the New York Sketch Book of Architecture, II, No. 10 (October, 1875), pl. 37, and was reprinted in Examples of Architecture (1880). This publication reprinted illustrations from the New York and Boston Sketch Books and The American Architect and Building News.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Bolhouse, Gladys; Downing, Antoinette F.; and others. Notebooks on Newport Buildings. Newport Historical Society.

Records of Deeds in Newport City Hall.

Smith, Eugenia Brandenburger. Rhode Island Resort

Architecture by McKim, Mead, and White. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1964. Copy at the Newport Historical Society.

Wilson, Richard G. Charles F. McKim and Development of the American Renaissance: A Study in Architecture and Culture. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Michigan, 1972.

Wood family papers. In the possession of Henry A. Wood, Jr.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Bridenbaugh, Carl. Cities in Revolt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

Downing, Antoinette. Early Homes of Rhode Island. Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1937.

Downing, Antoinette and Scully, Vincent J., Jr. The Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island. 2nd ed. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967.

Hitchcock, Henry Russell. Rhode Island Architecture. Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939.

Little, Nina Fletcher. American Decorative Wall Painting. Sturbridge, Mass.: Old Sturbridge Village in cooperation with Studio Publications, N. Y. C., 1952.

Manuel, Elton Merritt. Merchants and Mansions of By Gone Days. Newport: Remington Ward, 1939.

Wood, Anna Wharton. "The Robinson Family and their Correspondence with the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Noailles," Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society. No. 42. October, 1922, pp. 1-35.

3. Sources not yet investigated:

Daniel B. Smith and Benjamin R. Smith papers.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Owing to continuous family ownership and continuous maintenance rather than restoration,

this mid-18th century house presents a complete view of house plan, development, and architectural taste from c. 1735 to 1875.

2. Condition of fabric: The house is in excellent repair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular 2- $\frac{1}{2}$  story main block has five bays and measures 49 feet by 38 feet. There is a 10-foot-wide, single-story porch to the west and north. A single-story ell to the south measures 19 feet by 51 feet.
2. Foundations: All foundations are of irregular stone set in cement.
3. Wall construction: The exterior is faced with beaded clapboards painted a light gray.
4. Structural system: The house is framed in heavy timbers.
5. Porches, stoops, and bulkheads: The continuous porch on the west and north has a flat roof with molded eaves. The continuous balustrade is topped by a molded rail. Paired, chamfered posts are spaced at regular intervals along the entire length. A low, red Connecticut sandstone stoop with two foot scrapers is located at the center entrance. A bulkhead is located at the northeast corner of the house and adjoining porch.
6. Chimneys: Two red brick chimneys have metal flashings. The chimney to the north has a clay chimney pot.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The center entrance on the east has six paneled, double doors capped by a toplight of nine rectangular panes. The entire composition is enclosed by a heavy, molded pediment with dentils and two fluted pilasters with simplified Doric capitals. This door composition was recently restored based on dust marks found when the beaded clapboards were repaired. The dimensions found were identical with those of the entrance door of Whitehall, Bishop Berkeley's residence in Middletown, Rhode Island (RI-52). A paneled door with toplights is located in the closet to the north of the fireplace in the northeast corner living room. This door opens onto the north porch. Paired glass doors lead from the center rear sitting room to the porch on the west.



A six-paneled door leads to this porch from the southwest corner of the northwest sitting room. There is a modern door on the west facade of the kitchen ell.

- b. Windows and shutters: Most windows consist of double-hung, twelve-over-twelve-light sashes finished on the interior with two sectioned, two- and three-paneled shutters. In the north bay of the McKim sitting room, the three windows have a nine-light sash above a vertically divided two-light sash. The two windows on the west wall have a small upper sash with six lights tinted green and pink. The lower sash is a single pane.
7. Roof: The asphalt shingled gambrel roof presents a continuous roof line with boxed eaves to the east. On the west, the roof line is broken by the larger, 1760 addition to the north. The kitchen ell has a flat roof with molded eaves.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plans: The first-floor rooms are arranged around the large center entrance hall. The dining room opens to the left. From this room, access can be gained to the southwest sitting room and powder room, and the kitchen ell. The living room opens to the right with access to the northwest sitting room. A narrow hall extends to the west from the entrance hall into the rear sitting room or first kitchen. This room can also be reached from the northwest sitting room. On the second floor, the five chambers and two baths are arranged around the stair hall. The third floor contains three bedrooms; a large, rectangular hall; and a bath.
  2. Stairways: The center stairway turns 90° to the north from the south side of the center entrance hall. A straight run rises to a small second-floor landing. Three steps on both the east and west of the landing lead to the stair hall on the east and a small hall on the west. The open stair well is fitted with a ramped wainscoting which follows the rise of the heavy, molded, natural finished hand rail. There are three turned and tapered balusters with square bases per step. The open stringer has sawn scroll work. The open well is finished with a heavy molding which is terminated on the south by an applied flame drop and on the north by a full flame drop. The same motif is used as a drop, marking the break in the stringer at the landing. On the second floor, the stair well is enclosed by a balustrade on the east. A cramped stairway leads to the third floor from the small hall to

the west of the second-floor landing. The straight-run stairway to the basement is located in the c. 1735 part of the house, on the south side of the south end wall. The entrance to this closed stairway is located in the north wall of the kitchen ell.

3. Flooring: All floors are planked with boards varying in width from five inches to 18 inches. All floors in the first-floor rooms of the original house are painted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All ceilings and walls are plaster. The center entrance hall, living room, and northwest sitting room have wainscoting. All second-floor rooms and those in the c. 1735 portion of the first floor have heavy, molded baseboards. All rooms in the early section have encased corner posts. Most rooms have finely molded cornices with tracings over doorways and windows. All plaster work is painted white. All woodwork is painted with tints approximating the original colors--a soft, pale green dining room, an ochre tan living room, a dark black-green northwest sitting room, a blue-gray center rear sitting room and entrance hall, and a dull forest green rear southwest sitting room. The woodwork in the second-floor rooms is painted with similar colors, including yellow, a dull, yellow-green, and a gray-green.
5. Doorways and doors: On the first and second floors of the c. 1735 portion of the house, all doors have two panels. There are single-panel doors in the early portion of the third floor. In the c. 1760 addition, all doors have six panels. Doors leading to and from the McKim room have nine panels. All doorways are finely molded.
6. Special decorative features: The major rooms have very distinctive fireplace compositions. In the oldest section, c. 1735, the dining room arrangement is the most elaborately finished. The fireplace, located in the west wall, is set in a floor-to-ceiling composition. The narrow mantel shelf is set above the four-foot-wide opening. The opening is framed by a heavy, molded surround and faced with 5-inch by 5-inch imported glazed tiles depicting courting activities. The tiles are painted in puce on a gray-white ground. The opening is finished with a brass frame and stone hearth. A corner cupboard, located in the southeast corner of the room is composed of bolection moldings, heavy in scale, with a bracket-like tab centered in the arched top cupboard. Two doors, each with four panes of glass, open to display an intricately carved shell hood and three curved shelves.

The lower portion of the cupboard contains a small door with a double-curved top and a gouged flower. The entire composition is framed by fluted pilasters set on high paneled pedestals. A shorter pair of fluted pilasters frame the smaller, lower door. The rear sitting room at the southwest corner of the original house contains a small fireplace set in a floor-to-ceiling composition similar to that in the dining room. The 5-inch by 5-inch facing tiles contain octagonal puce frames which enclose blue and white Dutch landscape scenes. Each tile has blue floral corner decorations. The opening is framed in brass. The rear sitting room, originally the kitchen, has a small fireplace with two, two-paneled doors fronting a cupboard which is set into the wall above the opening. This opening was enclosed and made smaller at the time of the 1760 addition. The multi-colored, glazed facing tiles depict activities of the seasons. The opening is framed in brass. The bedroom in the southeast corner contains a fireplace arrangement similar to that in the dining room. The 5-inch by 5-inch tiles are painted blue on a white ground and depict fanciful Dutch landscapes. The individual panels of the fireplace composition have paintings of trees in various arrangements. The overmantel contains a scene with trees and piles of burning leaves. The stiles and rails are painted a variegated green. These panels are in the process of being restored. Other paintings have been found in the c. 1735 house but have not been restored. A ship scene was accidentally destroyed. The small rear bedroom located over the first kitchen contains a small fireplace bordered by 5-inch-square blue and white tiles, each having a circular composition of a floral arrangement set in an urn. A large, heavy, molded mantel shelf caps the wood paneling. The fireplaces in the 1760 addition are set in less heavily molded compositions. The fireplace in the west wall of the living room is framed by 5-inch-square tiles painted black on white depicting activities, ruins, and country scenes. The opening is framed by a brass strip. The bedroom above has a similarly treated fireplace. The bedroom in the northwest corner has a simple fireplace composition set in the east wall. This fireplace is faced with light blue, undecorated glazed tiles. The single third-floor fireplace, located in the east wall of the northwest corner room, has a simple stone surround with no tiles. The large fireplace composition in the McKim sitting room, 1874-1875, is very complicated in its decorative treatment. The four-foot high original 1760 opening is bordered by 5- $\frac{1}{4}$  inch square tiles painted in puce on white. Circular composition tiles depicting Biblical scenes are placed alternately with square composition tiles depicting various views of Dutch scenery. The Biblical tiles are similar to those in the Mrs. William Watts Sherman House of 1874

(RI-342). The hearth, which extends three feet into the room, is tiled in brown and terra cotta colored tiles with a linear star pattern. The woodwork around the fireplace is painted a dull, black green. The wall surface above the mantel is composed of horizontally and vertically grooved panels separated by horizontally banded pilasters topped by flame finials. Two colonnettes pierce the mantel shelf. They are turned, tapered, fluted and reeded, and capped by flame finials. The mantel is finely grooved with beads and dentils.

This house is completely furnished with period pieces of furniture, Chinese export ware, Oriental rugs, and marine paintings. After completion of the 1760 addition, Robinson purchased furniture from Thomas Goddard, Newport cabinetmaker and shipwright, who lived in the house to the north on Washington Street. Mrs. Robinson, heir of Edward Wanton, inherited some pieces of furniture which he had brought from England before 1658. Owing to continued family ownership, much of this old furniture remains in the house. The porch furniture--a gate-leg, slat-top table in particular--is said to have been designed by McKim. It is definitely of the period, c. 1875.

7. Hardware: In the original portion of the house, all doors have original latches, iron or brass H and L hinges, and brass knobs. Doors in the 1760 addition have L hinges and brass latches and knobs. All fireplaces have brass service hooks and other hardware. A large brass knocker is affixed to the exterior right center entrance door.
8. Lighting: The large wrought-iron and glass lantern hanging in the center entrance hall has been electrified.
9. Heating: A hot air furnace has recently been installed.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is set on the southern edge of the property, which is bordered by a driftway giving public access to Narragansett Bay. The property continues along the bay to the next driftway north. The house abuts the sidewalk, facing a residential street which is lined with large 18th- and 19th-century houses.
2. Historic landscape design: A photograph taken after the alterations of 1874-1875 shows a fence enclosing the property to the south of the main block and continuing to the water. The fence posts appear to have been about four feet high. Each post was turned, with a square base

and topped with a flame finial. Another fence extended from the north side of the house to the driftway opposite Willow Street. Today a chain-link fence runs from the north side of the house to the north driftway.

3. Outbuildings: Although no outbuilding exists at this time, an old description, c. 1824, lists a back building, a shop, and a wood shed, all stretching down to the water. All the buildings were connected with the house by a stone walk which was partly covered by a grapevine trellis. An old photograph also shows this collection of buildings. A photograph pre-dating 1864, shows a small, single-story, hipped-roof clock shop attached to the south side at the east corner of the house. This shop was run by David Williams, brother of Mary Williams who had received use of the house in 1835. From 1835 to 1864, Miss Williams ran a boarding house in the Thomas Robinson House.

Prepared by Susan R. Slade  
Architectural Historian  
August 16, 1972

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report is part of a photo-data project initiated in the summer of 1972 by the Historic American Buildings Survey, John Poppeliers, Chief, in cooperation with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Antoinette F. Downing, Chairman, and the Newport Restoration Foundation, Francis R. Comstock, Director. Historical and architectural documentation by Susan R. Slade supplements the photographs which were taken by HABS staff photographer, Jack E. Boucher, in 1971.